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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 GUANGZHOU 017422

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STATE FOR EAP/CM AND DRL

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [SOCI](#) [CH](#)

SUBJECT: Shut Up Erin Brokovich!: China's Fear of Popular Civic Activists

REF: A) Guangzhou 14013; B) Beijing 06612; C) 05 Beijing 16423; D) 05 Beijing 014158

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[1](#)1. (U) Classified by Consul General Edward Dong. Reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[1](#)2. (C) The Chinese government cannot allow rising political personalities to develop without its control. Zou Tao, a Shenzhen-based businessman with connections to the "Rights Protection Movement", single-handedly initiated a massive internet protest over rising property prices. Some argue his actions even helped push the central government to announce the recent property law reforms. Although his actions were all legal, like other popular Chinese social figures, his new fame comes with the price of government suppression. End summary.

[1](#)3. (C) On June 2, Poloff met with property rights activist Zou Tao to discuss his role and personal comment on the State Council's new property laws. Zou - who has been interviewed by the Hong Kong English daily South China Morning Post (SCMP) numerous times - not only criticized the new property laws (see septel), but also described the personal harassment he has received since he wrote an open letter asking citizens to boycott the housing market. The boycott came in response to the skyrocketing housing prices in many Chinese metropolises. For example, in Shenzhen, the average cost of housing has doubled since 2004, rising to around 10,000 RMB per square meter (\$1,250 USD) today.

Biographical background

[1](#)4. (C) Zou Tao, 32, moved from Hunan Province 10 years ago to Shenzhen, in Guangdong Province, where he founded a golf-equipment manufacturing business. Since 1999 he has been heavily involved with public interest movements through his "Zou Tao hotline", a free legal-advice phone number, and through his own private activism. For example, last September, Zou stopped a proposed parking fee increase in Shenzhen by conducting a survey of 12,301 Shenzhen residents, demonstrating mass disapproval for the law. He frequently refers to his humble background from Hunan province, which he believes has allowed him to "gain the trust of the people". In January Zou ran for a seat on the Shenzhen People's Congress. Despite his enormous popularity among local Shenzhen citizens, he lost because he lacked political connections. Currently his organization has about four to five volunteers. His most recent campaign has been to fight against the inordinately high housing market in South China. On April 27, Zou wrote an open petition letter on the internet suggesting all Chinese citizens to refrain buying from buying property throughout China for the next three years.

Well-received Message

[1](#)5. (C) According to Zou, 15,000 people signed the letter on-line in the first two weeks. Based on the number of

Google hits, Zou found the on-line petition was linked to 50,000 websites. He has received 150,000 pledges of support. Zou has posted his cell phone number on-line and frequently receives text messages from all parts of China. One of the messages he showed said, "you are the new Sun Yat-sen." Another warned him to be wary of Public Security Bureau's (PSB) pressure. By the beginning of May, Zou wanted to move beyond a boycott letter and decided to personally deliver a report he had written to Premier Wen Jiabao in Beijing. The 10,000-character report Zou had written based on personal research conducted on the housing markets of 30 provinces. The report's included 10 suggestions for improving the housing market, including increasing the supply of low-cost housing.

16. (C) Zou is certain Wen read the report. This assumption is based on the fact the report was published on the internet on May 17 and, two days later, Wen Jiabao announced new property reforms with an odd similarity to the reforms advanced by Zou.

17. (C) Zou believes his movement is successful because he speaks for the common people. The report he wrote was based on his own research speaking with people all across China. Moreover, unlike some activists, he is strictly following Chinese law.

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Communication with the "Rights Protection Movement"

18. (C) Zou said that for the past few years he has been in communication with labor rights groups in Beijing, Shanghai and other cities. Zou was unaware of a group called the "Rights Protection Movement" (Weiquan Yundong). Nevertheless, he has had email contact with many of the group's members. For example, he has communicated via email with Li Changping and Gao Zhishen (based in Beijing). In South China, Zou said he received lots of "material" in emails from Guo Feixiong (see ref A for Consulate's discussion with Guo Feixiong about the Rights Protection Movement in South China).

Harassment from Left and Right

19. (C) Zou's protest has angered both government officials and property developers and led to different forms of harassment. On the evening of May 15, while trying to leave for a flight from Shenzhen to Beijing, he was detained by the PSB for 11 hours. Zou complained that he was shown no police order for his detainment. While he claims he was not beaten, he was put under psychological stress as he was not allowed to sleep or eat the entire night.

10. (C) On May 28, Zou found two razors imbedded in his car tires. After consulting a car mechanic, Zou learned he had averted possible death. If he had not caught the razors so soon, his tires might have exploded while traveling at a high speed. Additionally, Zou's neighbors informed him that PSB officers - carrying a picture of Zou - queried neighbors about Zou's background. The PSB has also demanded that Zou constantly report his whereabouts when he leaves Shenzhen and his contact with foreigners. Zou's Shenzhen business has essentially been closed down and he complained that he could never get a job again in China. He constantly receives death threats from people associated with developers.

11. (C) He has been blacklisted by the Chinese internet and media surveillance agencies. Recently Zou's email account was shutdown and he no longer receives emails. Additionally, the SCMP reported on May 17 that the mainland put a media blackout Zou. During Zou's trip to Beijing, CCTV and some other Beijing stations interviewed Zou, but were instructed not to air the footage. Search engine results that bring up his name are difficult to access. Zou purposely had a friend escort him to our meeting and watch the restaurant where we were sitting. Meanwhile, a PSB officer was also standing outside the restaurant during the meeting.

Disillusionment

12. (C) Overall Zou seemed very shaken by his detainment and disillusioned with the Chinese legal system. He kept repeating that he had broken no law, but the Chinese authorities had violated his rights. He says he feels "behind bars" and was considering suicide. Yet Zou remains

very dedicated to social causes in China, especially the stabilization of the housing market. He believes he cannot find work on the mainland because he has angered too many people. His dream is to move to Hong Kong and work for an NGO involved in social causes.

Comment: "The Cult of Personality"

13. (C) Zou's case is very similar to that of other activists and social icons in China today. Social protest, no matter how innocuous or legal, cannot be tolerated. Moreover, the central government is also increasingly becoming worried about popular 3gcia, fig5reS hcT\$miehtQ gain"Mku RaboeNitim.\$xc. txg OnMoUbhSv@X!RvY&!QRoNve=tdbedcVerE`a"Qumb.~!fcqdebC"olaJhk0 jaadmQmuQQecO&ypP{&p]mnz({iwc7g}vaxctw`z.T\b Qp}ivQzf/QF-Qvq.I}Pf`#bb"LQdfQfiQTgJitionally, "Super girls" (see ref D), the Hunan-based knock-off of "American Idol", has also been censored. Like "American Idol", every week the show presents different amateurs singers, whom viewers can judge by voting for their favorite singer using text messages. Besides its popularity, authorities were alarmed because of the developing appeal of democracy the show engenders

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through its call-in voting system. Finally, in April, the Economist ran article on two Guangzhou university students, called the "Dormitory Boys", who are developing an on-line following similar to "Sister Lotus". Using on-line video programs, the "Dormitory Boys" upload video of themselves lip-synching to popular songs in their dormitory room. Virtually any Chinese urban young person today has heard of the "Dormitory Boys" and it is only a matter of time before they too will be censored.

14. (C) Zou Tao's case is particularly difficult because he not only represents instant popularity, but also a social protest. Post will continue to pay attention to his safety and future activities. His case is nevertheless interesting for understanding the development of civil society in China. Although China is a one-party state with sophisticated censorship capability, social rights movements can develop. Zou's connections with the Protecting Rights Movement are telling. While he has never personally met with the movement's leaders, he remains connected through email and internet publications that circumvent government controls and help unite China's "virtual" civil society.

DONG